

# Port Hills

(Te Poho-o-Tamatea)



## Natural History

The Port Hills are a 12 million-year-old remnant of the Lyttelton volcano crater. Wind, rain, sun, ice and snow have eroded the crater over the last 8 million years, to what can be seen today.

The hills are of special significance for their environmental, geological and scenic values. The plants growing on the Port Hills range from tussock grasses, podocarp and hardwood forest trees, to delicate native orchids. The Port Hills are also of national and international interest for their geological features, such as the prominent volcanic rock out-crops and volcanic dykes. For visitors and residents alike, the rugged outcrops of the Port Hills against the skyline, in contrast to the flatness of the Canterbury Plains, are a memorable sight.

## Flora

A wide variety of plants can be found on the Port Hills, such as lichen and mosses on rocks, mature totara and matai trees in pockets of remnant forest, and silver tussock and grasses. Prior to human arrival most of the Port Hills were covered in forest. The vegetation pattern seen on the hills today is a result of both historic and current factors, such as fire, grazing, rainfall, oversowing, logging and erosion.

Castle Rock (Te tahi o Kahukura) is a reserve noteworthy for its wide variety of plant life, as well as its recreational challenges. The rocky outcrops of Castle Rock provide microclimates for plants ranging from velvety red algae in the crevices of the



*Orchid*

Credit: Kelvin McMillan

rock, to cabbage trees and native shrubs at its base. Hebes and sun orchids take advantage of the gaps and cracks in the rock. In the grassland on the eastern side, silver tussocks and muehlenbeckia bushes grow in abundance. On the western side of the rock, shrubs, ferns, flax and small trees screen the base.

The large variety of plants growing on Castle Rock provide an ideal environment for an abundance of insects, such as the large iridescent predatory beetle, camouflaged spiders and brightly coloured copper butterflies.

The Ahuriri Scenic Reserve is an important Ecological Heritage Site due to the remnant podocarp/hardwood forest. Adult and juvenile matai, kahikatea and several large thin bark totara can still be seen amongst the bush. Hardwoods including mahoe, fivefinger, pepperleaf and coprosma provide a glimpse of what most of the Port Hills was like before the arrival of humans.

There are no walking tracks through the Ahuriri Scenic Reserve, however there is a good network of walking tracks in the nearby Kennedy's Bush Scenic Reserve. Remnants of native forest can also be found at Otahuna and Cass Peak



*View from the Port Hills looking over Pegasus Bay.*

Credit: Kelvin McMillan

## Fauna

The native remnants of bush on the Port Hills are home to some of our native birds. The clear notes of the bellbird (korimako) can be heard in the bush during the summer months. Other common bush birds are the fantail and the grey warbler. The shining cuckoo (pipwharauwa) and the South Island tomtit (ngiru-ngiru) are becoming established in the bush as pest control is maintained and replanting enhances their habitat. The New Zealand wood pigeon, (kukupa or kereru), is the largest berry-eating bird in New Zealand and an important seed-disperser for many native plants. The wood pigeon can often be seen when walking through the bush reserves and Victoria Park. The most common birds seen on the Port Hills are introduced, such as the blackbird, chaffinch and song thrush.



## Human History

The Waitaha were the first Maori settlers in the Christchurch area. They were a peaceful tribe and in the 1500s through intermarriage, warfare and finally negotiated peace, they were assimilated by a North Island tribal group, the Ngati Mamoe. In the mid 1700s the Ngai Tahu migrated south from the North Island and, in a process similar to that experienced by the Waitaha, assimilated the Ngati Mamoe.

The Waitaha established settlements at three locations on the Port Hills: Ohinehou, by the entrance to what is now the Lyttelton tunnel; Ohinetahi Pa at Governors Bay and Te Manuka Pa at Halswell. Ngai Tahu's main settlement on the Port Hills was at Rapaki.

In the early 1800s European sealers, whalers and flax traders visited Banks Peninsula. In 1851 the first organised European settlers travelled from Lyttelton to Christchurch over the Bridle Path, which was to become the main route between Lyttelton and Christchurch until the Lyttelton rail tunnel opened in 1867.

Farming on the Port Hills began early with bush covered land cleared for pasture. Concerned with the rapidly diminishing bush on the Port Hills, Henry George Ell (Harry Ell), a Member of Parliament, lobbied for The Scenery Preservation Act 1908. Harry Ell's vision was to establish a network of scenic reserves along the Port Hills, with the Summit Road providing the linkage between reserves and regularly spaced rest houses for walkers and travellers. In 1906 Harry Ell secured the first scenic reserve, Kennedys Bush and in 1908, work began on the Summit Road.

During Ell's term in Parliament, from 1899 to 1919, he secured more than 500 scenic reserves. Harry worked hard to encourage and advocate conservation of, and public access to the Port Hills. The walkway from Victoria Park to the Sign of the Kiwi is named after Harry Ell.

In 1948 the Summit Road Society was formed and continues to further the vision of Harry Ell by working to enhance, preserve and protect the nature, beauty and open character of the Port Hills.

## Management issues

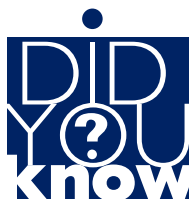
The benefits people gain from the Port Hills are as varied as they are extensive. Many people value the open natural spaces uncluttered by houses and people, while others value the views and unpolluted air they gain from living or exercising on the hills. The management of the Port Hills is therefore, a very complicated balancing act between the people who want to use the hills and the protection and preservation of the natural environment.

Only parts of the Port Hills are protected, while other areas are in private ownership, such as farmland. As economic conditions have changed some farmers have planted exotic forests on the hills in areas that were previously pasture. Other farmers have subdivided their land for new housing developments or smaller lifestyle blocks.

Erosion of the Port Hills is ongoing, causing unsightly scars, contributing to stormwater drainage problems and reducing pasture areas. Some areas have become more susceptible to erosion as the native forest cover has diminished over time due to human and natural causes. Overgrazing by sheep and cattle, rabbits, possums and introduced weeds, such as the South African boneseed bush, have all contributed to the reduction of native tussock lands, threatened bush and increased the problems of land management.

## Recreation

With the Port Hill's varied terrain there are a variety of recreational activities available. Rock climbing, paragliding and hang gliding occur on the higher areas, while walking, jogging and mountain biking take place over much of the hills. Orienteering and four-wheel driving are some of the other formal activities that also regularly use the Port Hills. People out for a drive, visitors and dog walkers also visit regularly. The management of the recreation groups and the protection of the environment are key issues for the conservation of the Port Hills for future generations.



- The most complete World War II artillery complex in New Zealand today can be seen at Godley Head?
- On 24/25 June 1941 the German minelayer ship, *Adjutant*, laid 10 mines across the entrance to Lyttelton Harbour. Its actions were watched from the Godley Head Battery.
- On the Mt Pleasant Bluffs walkway there are four concrete anti-aircraft gun emplacements built in 1942. The 3.7 inch guns were mounted on 360 degree turntables, and could engage aircraft flying up to 20,000 feet, firing 20 shells a minute.

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Leisure Unit, Christchurch City Council: Christchurch [NZ]. Mark Pickering (Ed.). (1998). *Walk Christchurch: 60 short walks that explore your city*. Christchurch City Council (2000) *Christchurch Naturally: discovering the city's wild side*. Christchurch City Council: Christchurch [NZ].

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### For more educational information

<http://www.ccc.govt.nz/LearningThroughAction/>  
<http://www.ccc.govt.nz/Publications/ResourceCatalogueForSchools/>

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